

Amandy Higginson's Admirers

By MORLEY ROBERTS.

LD Bill lived with his wife and daughter on a feeder of Double Mountain Creek, in the north-western part of Texas. He dressed in an antique black frock coat and wore a Panama hat. Both dated from "before the war," and there was no mistake about that. Herodotus about the ranges and the prairies on an ancient bronco, not quite so antique as his clothes, but so antique that the cowboys said the "pinto" had been in the Ark.

His family was one daughter, and he was "cussed" with her, there were many young men who would have thought themselves blessed if Amandy Higginson had so much as smiled on them. She was plump and fair and very engaging, and called her mother "Maw," and her father "Paw." And girls were scarce around Double Mountain, while at that time cowboys were plentiful, and Texas was not yet fenced in and sheep were not outting cattle.

When old Bill was happy he said "Amandy" was the apple of his eye. He said she was the finest girl between the forty-ninth parallel and the Mexican border, and was going to marry a rich man. When any cowboy came round with a courting look in his eyes and a new necktie on, Bill developed madness.

"I'll stand this hyer crowd off with a shotgun, Mary," he said to his wife. "Amandy is the girl to wed. I'm sure. There's no girl like Amandy. Cowboys is 'pisin to me, and I'll make 'em food for coyotes if they kin languishin' around this ranch. You tell 'em so, d'ye hear? I'll feed 'em to the beasts of the field."

He snorted and his white eyes looked very fierce. The young men in chappareos and guns fought shy of him. It is horrid to be confronted with a "gun" when one comes courting for it, of course, almost impossible to kill one's prospective father-in-law, without discouraging the lady.

Now it happened one bright day in the later Spring when Northerners were over, and the prairie flowers were out and all things were heavenly, and the cattle were lively and the wind sweet, Amandy put on her sun-bonnet to keep her skin from freckling and took a little walk on the prairie away from the creek.

"Good day, Amandy," said Billy. "Oh, it's you," said the ungracious Amandy. "Pears to me if I warn't allowed to walk the prairie o' Texas free and without guards. What did you spring from?"

"I wuz jest a-ridin' by," began Billy. "You allers is jest a-ridin' by," said Amandy. "An' if you ain't jest a-ridin' by, it's Mr. Galpin is, or Mr. Gaylord or Morgan Harris."

"Wal, I knowed as your Paw wuz away to Painted Rock, Amandy, and I thot as it wuz a good time to hev a little talk with you and clear things up some. For I'm gettin' fair desprit, Amandy, and I owns it."

"That's what Morgan says, and Merrick and Tom. You all says it, and what I've got to dew with you bein' desprit beats me, Billy Prentiss. Can't a girl go a-walkin' on the prairie owned by her own father without bein' confronted with cowboys sayin' they're desprit and doin' nothin' but sayin' they're desprit?"

"Is your fault I'm desprit," urged Billy. "You know I loves you mor'n I loves my own life. I've said it repeated to you, an' I sez it agin'."

Amandy tossed her pretty head and replied: "So's Joyce and Merrick and Morgan and the lot of you, an' if I payssed my word to you, the others would be desprit. And I don't love no one, and if I did 't would be no good, for Paw allows, as you knows, Mr. Prentiss, that he'll blow a hole threw any cowboy as he ketches sight of within a hundred rods of me. And to-day he's very mad about everything and was outrageous in denouncin' you and Joyce before he pulled out for the Rock. So it ain't my fault, that!"

"I don't care the snap of my finger for your Paw and his gun," said Billy. "If you says you'll love me I'll marry you right off and he can't shoot his son-in-law 'thout bein' reckoned a mean man. An' he can't neither, for I kin take care o' myself, and he knowst it."

Amandy fired up. "I suppose you reckon if he came arter you, then, you'd just up and shoot him first?" she asked.

"I'd hev to, maybe," declared Billy apologetically. "What! shoot my old Paw?"

"Not 'less he pulled on me, Amandy." "The idea o' my merrin' a man that allows he'd shoot my Paw!" said Amandy. "The idee's ridiculous, Billy Prentiss, and you knows it. I ain't a-goin' to expose my Paw to danger. Not but that the danger 'ud be o' bein' tried for killin' you, for he's deadly with weapons."

"Deadly! be consarned!" said Prentiss. "The ole galoot can't shoot for sour apples. The only gun he's any good with is his mouth."

"That lets me out," said Amandy furiously; "don't you speak disrespectful of my Paw! You and me hez finished, Mr. Prentiss; not that we ever begun" (here she tossed her head) "as I knows of. You can't be insulatin' to Paw and stay in with me."

"Oh, I ain't intendin' to insult him any," protested Billy in distress, "all I allowed wuz as he can't shoot any, and that he's gay and free with his tongue, as everyone round these parts knows as well as me."

But Amandy wouldn't listen. "If you ain't civil to Paw you can't get me to talk," she declared, "and I'll be thankful if, when we meets, you'll payss me by, Mr. Prentiss. I'm fair sick of desperation, mixed with oncovility to my parents, for you never even so much as payss the time of day with my pore Maw."

Billy exploded. "Why, Amandy! Lord's sake! how kin I, when your Paw sets outside with his hair a-bristling and a gun ready to shoot if we kems within havy a mile? It's fair ridiculous to speak so."

But at that Amandy turned short and walked towards the house. "Oh, Amandy!" said Billy. She paid no attention.

"Oh, Amandy, Amandy, Amandy!" he repeated. "Miss Higginson, if you please," said Amandy coldly. "Miss Higginson, then," implored Billy, leading his horse after her.

"Nor 'Miss Higginson' don't work neither," said Amandy triumphantly. And then Billy stayed in his tracks and said no more.

When he had recovered himself a little, Amandy was entering her Paw's house without a look in his direction.

"I'm fair desprit," said Billy Prentiss. He was then aware of a horseman coming up behind him at an easy walk. As he mounted, they met face to face, and though Billy did not know who the man was, he felt that he was strangely like old Bill Higginson.

The stranger started, and said hastily that he warn't lookin' for anything but Bill Higginson's place. "Wal, that's it and you're welcome to it," said Billy, as he put spurs to his bronco, and loped off. The stranger pulled his horse round and stared after him.

"I believe that was Amandy with him, and that he was a-kissin' of her or my eyes deceived me," said Billy Higginson's brother. "He sure looked fightable 's if he suspected some I'd cot him. This must be told to Bill. It will pake Bill mad."

He rode to the house and alighted. Mrs. Higginson and Amandy came out.

"Mary, my dear, and Amandy, how air you?" asked George Higginson, "and where's Bill?"

"You're welcome, brother-in-law," said Mrs. Higginson, "but Bill's to Painted Rock and won't be hum till to-night. Ken in out o' the sun and Amandy will look after your hoss."

And George Higginson went in. "I'm right glad to see you," he said. "And I've all sorts of news for Bill. Bless me! I ain't bin hyer for nigh onto a year, and how Amandy rises up, and I du reckon the cowboys kems around and after her some, don't they, Mary? Oh, yep, you bet, add Bill, is he as sot on standin' o' em off with a Winchester or a double-pronged scatter-gun as he was? Wal! to be sure to be sure. Gawd bless you, Amandy, you're a good gal to look arter your old uncle's hoss, and as spy and as pretty a gal as I've sot eyes on in Texas this year payst."

And if you say 'est, Mary, I'm with you, for I'm as hungry as a buzzard and could eat anythin'."

He told Mrs. Higginson and Amandy all about everything on his ranch over on his side of the country and said how Seth Smith was supposed to be dead on account of horse-stealing. But how he died he wouldn't say. And he further said that the feed on the ranges wasn't what it had been, and that he hated sheep, and that life was a burden.

But all the while his very fertile imagination was working on the subject of Amandy and the large cowboy. His talk presently followed his mind.

"You ain't married yet, Amandy?" he said with a nervous laugh. "I ain't a-thinkin' o' marriage," returned Amandy. "Pears to me you should thotk of it," said her uncle.

"Brother George," he remarked in a strangled whistle, "if you don't want me to apoplex sudden you'll be just a trifle clearer and not so long-winded. What's it all about, before I shoots you for alarmin' me?"

"Be calm," said George. "I am calm," said George. "It's about our pore dear little Amandy—" George began.

"A word agin' Amandy and I'll—"stuttered Bill. "No, no, brother, you won't. Would I say it was her fault? And if it warn't with such as the villain I'm a-goin to mention you can't shoot me, your sad brother."

Bill choked and turned blue in the face, but he put on an air of "calmness."

"Speak! what is it?" "It's Amandy. You reckon she'll marry a millionaire?"

Bill made alarming noises, but nodded his head. "It'll be well if she marries a large cowboy roaming this neighborhood," said George mournfully.

"A cowboy! My Gawd—" Bill could say no more.

"I see the pore innocent with him, Bill. Oh, I'm sad to say I surprised 'em. She ran, and he looked at me very fightable and mad, but I kept 'em so's not to let him know what I seen, and I outfaced him."

"What did you see?" whispered Bill. "Her and him kissin', and him huggin' her—but I'll say no more. You and me will hunt him up and make him marry her right off!"

Bill didn't "apoplex," but he looked alarmingly near it.

"I've made a plan," he said when he got outside and had the pinto saddled up. "You'll ride over to the Williams' ranch, ten miles to the northwest, George. They've Brother Brandram stayin' with 'em. Tell him to kem over at once to see some one in imminent danger o' death. If he won't come, make him, at the pint o' your gun. I'll seek Billy Prentiss with thess shotgun. I'll either bring him, or a part of him, or perish. Go!"

In an hour and a half he found the Williams, ranch. He inquired for Brother Brandram and a portly gentleman in black came out.

"You desire to see me, sir?" said the minister. "I dew," said George. "Would you oblige me and my brother, Bill Higginson, by kemmin' over to our ranch, ten miles southeast of this spot, to see some one in imminent danger of immediate decease?"

"Dear me! of course I will," said Brother Brandram. "I can get a horse here, and will be ready in a minute. Is it a question of decease?"

"Not infectious," said George hastily. "I'll explain it as we go along."

And Brandram, having got a pony saddled, came away at once.

"In the midst of life we are in death," said Brother Brandram cheerfully. "Is the sick man a relation of yours, sir?"

"Not yet," said George. "I mean he ain't." "Is he looking very bad?" asked the minister.

"How sad!" said Brother Brandram. "Can you say what's the matter?"

"No, that I can't. Bill said it was confidential." "Confidential!" said Brandram. "Bless me! You don't mean it's a crime?"

"over to Salt Creek," and when Bill got there he found him surely enough.

"Why there is ole Higginson," said Billy Prentiss, "what's he a-doin' a-ridin' around hyer? If he was dead I'd be pleased, and mebbe Amandy would be none too sad neither."

Old Bill rode up. He pointed his shotgun straight at the cowboy.

"Don't do that!" said Prentiss angrily. "The dern ole thing might go off!"

But old Bill looked mighty serious. He spoke, and Prentiss knew that this was business.

"Unbuckle thet belt o' yours and let your gun fall onto the ground," said old Bill, "or I'll put a double handful of shot into your stummock 'thout another word!"

The cowboy looked at him steadily.

"D'ye mean it, Mr. Higginson? I own you've got the drop on me."

"I mean it," said Higginson. His fierce old eyes said so, too.

So Prentiss unbuckled his belt and let his gun fall to the ground.

"Walk away some," said old Bill. When Prentiss was twenty yards away, Higginson alighted and picked up the weapon. He belted himself with it and mounted again.

"You'll walk ahead o' me to my ranch," said old Bill in the same awful voice.

"It's sure somethin' about Amandy," thought Prentiss as he marched. "Pore little Amandy! But I'm some surprised! What'll he do? I reckon he'll likely kill me."

It looked very like it. But after half an hour's steady walk the ranch was just ahead of them.

"Now we'll hear what's the difficulty," he said. And then he saw two horsemen coming from the northwest. The four of them met just outside the door.

"Thess is the minister, Brother Brandram," said George Higginson.

"Glad to see you, sub," said Bill grimly. "I've got some business for you, sub."

"I shall be glad to know why—" began Brandram, but Bill cut him short.

"You'll know soon enough. Mary!" His wife came out to the door.

"Let out Amandy," said her husband. "Them as shut her up kin let her darter out," said old Mary angrily.

"I'll speak to you later on, woman," said Bill. "George, get off your horse and let Amandy out."

George did as he was told. He broke down the nailed batten and found Amandy with red eyes.

"You're to kem out," said George nervously. "I won't come out," said Amandy.

"You won't?" "I won't."

"Your Paw says you are to."

"Tell him them as shut me up kin fetch me out," said Amandy.

George repeated this to the father.

"Amandy," said the old man. "There was no answer."

"Amandy," he roared. "Ye-es, Paw," said the poor girl.

"Ef you don't kem out befo' a minute's gone, I'll kill Billy Prentiss right here!"

The last person in Amandy's mind was Billy Prentiss; why should he kill Billy? It was very strange.

"Oh, kem out, Amandy," said her mother.

"Don't you kem out if you don't want to, Amandy," roared Billy Prentiss. "Ef he wants to kill me, let him."

But Amandy crept out.

"I—I don't want you killed, Mr. Prentiss," said Amandy. "What hev you done?"

Bill Higginson, still on the pinto, and with his shotgun covering the group, roared, "Silence," and then he turned to the minister.

"Merry them two, sub, and do it immejet," he said. "O Paw," said Amandy.

"Silence, gal," said her father.

"I won't merry him," said Amandy.

"Don't you if you don't want to, Amandy," said Billy.

Brother Brandram intervened.

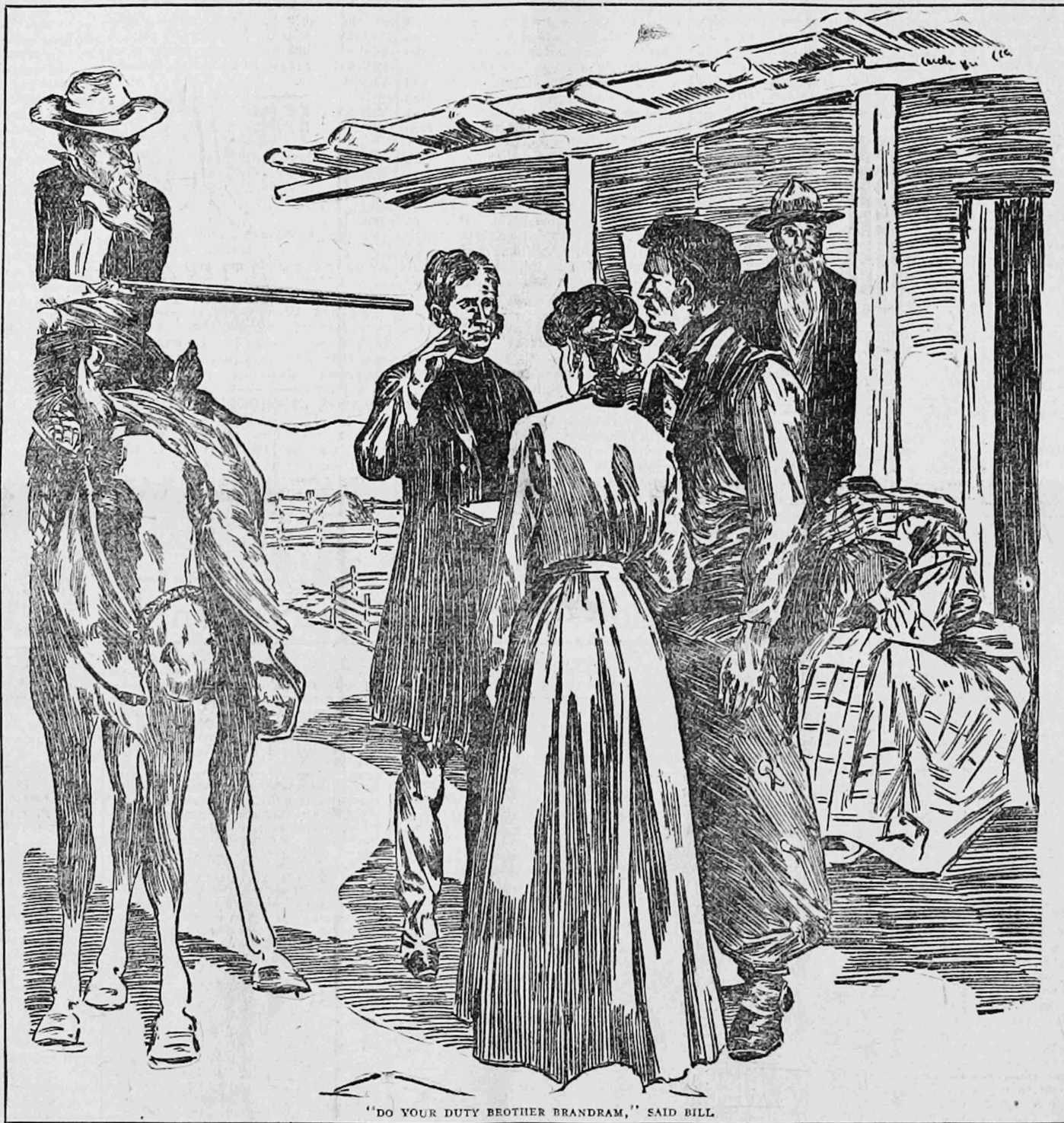
"If the young lady doesn't want to marry this young man, I can't do it," said he.

Bill lifted his gun.

"You kin and you will, or I'll kill you all, and fire the ranch, and kill the pinto, and blow my head off," said Bill.

"Steady," said Billy Prentiss. "I'm ready to merry her, and Amandy knows it, for I've bin askin' her this twelve months, but I'd far rather perish here in my tracks than merry her agin' her will."

"Good-by, Amandy. I always loved you," said the cowboy.



"DO YOUR DUTY BROTHER BRANDRAM," SAID BILL.

"There's sad dangers in this world for the unmarried, specially unmarried gals; ain't there, Mary?"

"I'd like to see you married right off," mused George, who was sadly afraid he'd seen more than he had known at first. He got surer of it every moment.

"I ain't reckonin' to be married," said Amandy angrily.

"You ain't, Amandy?" "No, I ain't."

George shook his head. Evidently the bad and wicked and large cowboy wouldn't marry her!

He went on to explain some of the dangers of the single state, and discussed gay deceivers until Amandy fled and Mrs. Higginson yawned. She hadn't seen any gay deceivers around her neighborhood and "wasn't troublin' any about 'em," she said.

"Thank the Lord, here's Paw!" said Amandy, as she flew out to greet him, when he came trotting up to the door.

"In the mawnin' when he's rested and quiet I'll get him on one side and relate thess disaster to him," said George. "But I'll hev another drop o' tea Mary. Tellin' the noos makes me dry, so it does, though I'm not one to talk, 'cept on occasions."

"Mornin', George," said Bill. "Hopes you're brighter this mornin'?"

"No, I ain't brighter, not a cent's worth brighter. For now the time has kem for me to speak to you on a sad pint, and one I'd rather perish miserably in a blizzard on the prairie than mention," said George.

"Let us take a little walk, and let me beg you to be calm while I relates the suspicious events to which I was a sad and horrified witness yesterday," replied George.

Bill's face turned crimson and his white hair stood on end.

"What was he like?" "Large and powerful, weighin' some two hundred pound or thereabouts," said George, "and he'd an ivory butt to his gun and mesquite leggings and a red shirt, and his eyes was blue, and he warn't bad-lookin', and he rode a big sorrel pony branded 'Circle X' on the near shoulder."

"That's Billy Prentiss," said Bill Higginson; "sure as death that's Billy Prentiss, who is this minute, lookin' forward a little, as dear as ever any man was."

But George grabbed his arm.

"No, Bill, make him merry her. If you kill him whar'll she be?" "But say you'll make him merry her and only kill him afterwards."

"Amandy, to your room, gal!" he yelled.

"Oh, Paw!"

"To your room, gal!" he repeated.

"Lord sakes, William!" said his wife. "Silence, woman! Amandy, to your room!"

And Amandy fled like a lamb before a blizzard, while her father glowered and made horrid noises in his throat.

"Gimme that batten there," he said.

George brought him a short piece of wood.

"The hammer and nails, woman!" said Bill, shortly. His wife brought them trembling. He nailed Amandy's door up. Then he went outside and did the same to the window.

"George, get your horse up and I'll get the pinto," he said. Mrs. Higginson exploded.

"What's the pore gal done?" she cried.

"Don't ask me," said Amandy's father. "If you let her out till I return I'll kill all my family, and the pinto, and fire the house, and shoot George, and blow my own head off. Air you ready, George?"

"Oh, by no means, not at all," said George hastily. "There ain't no one killed. But Amandy's locked up."

"Amandy?" "She's my niece," said George.

"But why's she locked up, and what has she to do with the sick man?"

"My brother is goin' to hev that explained or perish," replied George.

The minister shook his head.

"Somehow I don't quite understand," he said. "Is the girl ill?"

"Grin! fit to bust!"

"About the dyin' man?"

"She don't know he's dyin' and he ain't ezactly dyin', but only like to die," said George in confusion. "My brother's fetchin' him along."

"Fetchin' him along! In a wagon?"

"I reckon he'll ride fast," said George, "and with Bill behind him he'll ride fast."

"Humph!" said the minister. He pulled up.

"Not before I understand," said Brandram firmly. "You say the man's not exactly dyin', but likely to die, and that he'll ride fast with your brother (if I apprehend you rightly he is your brother) behind him. Now why is your brother behind him?"

"Why, to fetch him along, surely," said George; "he wouldn't kem else. But with Bill behind him with a shotgun he'll kem and no fatal error."

They rode on in silence.

"I wish I understood," said the unfortunate captive. "I wish I understood."

Now about this time Bill armed with his deadly shotgun and mounted on the antique pinto was just about to come across Billy Prentiss.

They told him at the Circle X Outfit that Bill was